The Moral Libertarian Horizon Series
Volume 5

The Background and Context of Moral Libertarianism

The aim of this book is to illustrate more clearly the background and context in which I derived my Moral Libertarian ideas. I believe that, to truly understand an idea, we must understand its context, so that we don't take its application out of context.

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Part 1: The History of my Moral Libertarian Conscience

Chapter 1. It Starts With Love And Compassion

Let's start here. What defines a person? I believe that, above all, it is the values. To understand a person, we must start from their values. So what are my values? What direction does my moral compass point in? I believe it all starts with love and compassion.

The awakening of my social and political conscience began around the time I started college, in 2003, at the age of 16. It was a time that was full of moral challenges and controversies. The West was still recovering from the major psychological and social impacts of the 9/11 attacks. There was concern about the erosion of civil liberties and the rise in racism in response to the attacks, in many Western countries. The US and it allies entered the Iraq War under dubious justifications, triggering an intense anti-war movement, the

likes of which was not seen since the end of the Vietnam War. Gay marriage rights became a hot topic, encouraged by its legalization in the first English-speaking places like Ontario and Massachusetts, as well as the US Supreme Court finally making it legal to be gay across all 50 states. This, in turn, triggered a major backlash and 'awakening' from the religious right, which conservative politicians would eagerly take advantage of leading up to the national elections the following year in the US, Canada and Australia.

It was in this context, that the beliefs I had up until that point, would be tested and challenged by the unfolding events and debates. The Iraq War, an unnecessary war that inevitably came with destruction and loss of life, was something I was naturally opposed to. My view was that, any decent human being who treated others with love and compassion had to oppose it. Yet, there were indeed people, many of them probably not bad people, who strongly

supported the war, thinking that it would 'spread freedom' to Iraq. Even at 16, I knew that this wasn't going to work, and was also fundamentally wrong. It was hard for me to reconcile with the fact that good people were supporting something I thought to be immoral. I gradually realized that good people were morally fallible too, and there needs to be safeguards to prevent a bandwagon effect in supporting immoral actions. Compounding this was some commentators and 'activists' alike who strongly supported the Bush administration and/or the war, who essentially painted dissenters as traitors. The political Right may style themselves as defenders of free speech today, but I will never remember how many of them encouraged this kind of worldview and rhetoric.

And then, there was the Dixie Chicks boycott, which was actually the first example of what we now call cancel culture, that I can remember. It was the start of my long record of opposing

cancel culture. Back then, I found cancelling people, destroying people's careers for their beliefs, totally unreasonable, totally uncivilized, and also incompatible with love and compassion, and I still feel that way today. I also thought deeply about the political implications of cancel culture: if people can have their career destroyed just by saying what their conscience believes to be true, what does that mean for the health of Western democracy? After all, even though I wasn't even old enough to vote back then, I knew that in a Western democracy, the main brake on immoral government actions is through elections, where we elect our governments and hold them accountable. Hence, the moral conscience of every citizen must be clear, and we must be able to decide what is right and wrong ourselves, without pressure or coercion from influential people or authority figures.

This was perhaps the start of my Moral Libertarian idea: since no human being is

infallible, no matter their intentions, no human being should be granted moral agency over and above another. This is why effective free speech is so important. Western democracies generally have robust safeguards on political speech, but this often only prevents the government itself suppressing speech. The Dixie Chicks boycott, as well as the pressure on Iraq War dissenters to shut up in general, taught me that even if free speech is theoretically legally protected, it might still be limited socially, to the point that people actually feel afraid of calling out immoral acts. Hence, we need a culture of respecting free speech, not just to the letter of the law, but to recognize it as a foundational principle of the Western democratic moral code, due to its important role in preventing immorality from going unchecked.

A related issue was the racism and tribalism that was prevalent in that period. There was, of course, the crude racism that one could feel throughout society. But in intellectual circles,

there was something even more dangerous. There was talk of how Western civilization and Islamic or middle eastern culture were incompatible, even invoking historical events such as the Crusades to justify a 'clash of civilizations' worldview. Now, I recognize that different cultures have their own history, their own context and their own moral code, and are not exactly interchangeable. That's why I always say that the West should mind its own business, and why, as a Western citizen, I only comment on Western society and politics. However, it should still be possible for different cultures to live and coexist peacefully on this planet. We should be able to find plenty of common ground in our common humanity. While we may live in very different contexts, and live under different cultural, legal and political systems, it remains true that we all care deeply for our families, our friends, and our communities. Love and compassion is practiced around the world every day, even if the details differ across different cultural belief systems. This is what I mean by our common humanity. A 'clash of civilizations'

worldview basically denies this common humanity, and ultimately justifies racism, tribalism, and even immoral wars. Seeing this 'clash of civilizations' rhetoric made me realize the dark side of humanity, and the grave dangers of adopting any us-vs-them worldview. This is why my views have been underpinned by a strong moral individualism ever since.

The issue of gay marriage rights was the first major issue that challenged the worldview I was taught to have during my upbringing. Growing up in the homophobic 1990s, in a conservative context, I strongly believed that the gay marriage movement was wrong. There was a time when I actually believed all the things the anti marriage equality activists said: that gay marriage would destroy family values, that the movement had an agenda to radically change society, that gay marriage was 'not natural' and was hence social engineering. But by 2003, when the first gay marriages occurred in the English-speaking world, I saw that these were

happy couples celebrating their big day, just like straight couples. Who am I to deny that to them? That would indeed be anything but loving and compassionate!

The fact that many good people supported the Iraq War, taught me that good intentions didn't necessarily mean morally sound views. I had the good intention of upholding family values and protecting the health of the social fabric, things that are still dear to my heart today, but it didn't mean my old views on gay marriage were necessarily sound. I thought more deeply on the issue of gay marriage, and whether there are any bad implications for society, and I decided that there were none. So I became a supporter of gay marriage. And events since then, including the fact that gay marriage has been legalized across most of the West without any negative effects on society, have proven my change of heart to be correct.

My experience with changing my views on gay marriage taught me several things. Firstly, one should always be open to re-examine their pre-existing beliefs, and admit that they were wrong. Secondly, one should not just believe the propaganda of activists, but rather take the effort to independently think about the issues in front of us. Finally, one should not take an us-vs-them view on political differences, because people can always change their minds. On gay marriage, I was once strongly on one side, and I moved to the opposite side to become a strong advocate on that side. I also had the additional advantage of having been on the other side, so I know where their arguments and concerns were coming from. To understand where people who disagree are coming from, I believe, is the most important part of changing minds. Too many activists harbor an essentially tribalist attitude, and basically refuse to understand and empathize with the other side. I believe this is a fundamental mistake.

The moral worldview that I developed from the events of the opening years of the 21st century, guided by my commitment to love and compassion, and the practical implications of this when operating in the real world, have served me well over the years. I believe history has generally vindicated the stances I took at 16: most people now think the Iraq War was a mistake, conservatives who boycotted the Dixie Chicks are now decrying cancel culture nowadays, there is a renewed focus on free speech, and gay marriage has been legalized in most of the West, and enjoys high levels of support among the public. While the issues of 2003 seem like history now, we are faced with new issues today (I am writing this in 2021), where the same principles remain applicable, probably because human nature is fundamentally unchanging. Today's identity politics, of both the left-wing and right-wing varieties, is just as tribalist as the 'clash of civilizations' rhetoric back then. Cancel culture mainly comes from a different section of society nowadays, but it is still morally wrong in exactly

the same way. The moral panic about gay marriage seems to have turned into moral panic about certain trans issues, which unfortunately has a more direct impact on me personally. Fortunately, my experience of having been on both sides of the gay marriage debate continues to serve me well in arguing against the new moral panic. Finally, pro-war, pro-conflict neo-conservative forces appear to be making a comeback in Western politics. We will need to maintain the same anti-war commitment that we had back then. It will be rooted in the same moral arguments we had back then, which remain as valid as ever.

Chapter 2. Bridging the Divide

In recent years, it has often been said that the Western political landscape is sharply divided and polarized, and that this is unhealthy for our democracy. However, this trend has actually been happening for quite a while. Even when I was in college, there was plenty of divisiveness and tribalism. People were divided on the post-9/11 'war on terror', the Iraq War, and gay rights. This coincided with an increasingly sharp divide between those who were religious and 'traditional', versus those who were secular and 'progressive'. In turn, this often coincided with the places people lived in, rural vs urban, as well as geographical divides, particularly in North America. The 2004 US elections demonstrated these faultlines clearly, and there was commentary and debate across the Western world on division and polarization in the months following. As I said, none of this is new at all.

Of course, the dividing lines back then were somewhat different. While in recent years I tend to say that I am 'politically homeless', 'in the middle' (perhaps technically incorrect because I'm not a fencesitter), 'on neither side' or something like that, back then, I was clearly on one side and opposed to the other. I mean, if you had a libertarian concern about civil liberties, you opposed the Iraq War, you strongly supported gay marriage and was skeptical of the religious right, you clearly weren't going to be a fan of the George W. Bush brand of conservatism. And the other side, whatever that side was called, was mainly about opposing Bush and his counterparts in other Western countries. The 'left' back then was way less ideological, it was way more diverse, and there was sort of a libertarian bent to it. As such, I felt very comfortable being part of 'the left' back then, and I didn't feel 'politically homeless' or 'on neither side' like I do today.

Although I had a comfortable tribe to belong to back then, I was still uncomfortable with tribalism. However I disagree with the other side, however disappointed I was that we seemed to be on the losing side back then, I still wanted to reach out and understand the other side. (To this day, I still can't understand why most other people don't seem to share my attitude.) The problem was, you can't just walk up to a member of the other side and ask to talk. Firstly, that would be awkward. Secondly, most people probably wouldn't take up the offer. Finally, you probably can't identify a member of the 'other side' in the first place, because most people don't discuss politics with strangers. Luckily, there were plenty of books written by conservatives I could read. And helpfully, it was also the dawn of political blogs, i.e. regularly updated personal websites that focused on politics. The 2004 US election was widely credited with popularizing political blogs, a phenomenon that later declined with the rise of social media. I even set out to understand the

'religious right', the political faction that I was most frustrated with back then.

Let's be honest. Reading the other side isn't always nice. The disagreements were real, and, especially in the informal world of the blogosphere, insults were common. It wasn't uncommon for conservatives to call us liberals 'crazy airheads' or worse, and it was very common particularly for them to gloat about Bush's 2004 victory, rubbing the salt in where they can. The religious right was particularly difficult: the sheer amount of homophobic sentiment, plus Islamophobia, and even hostility towards followers of other religions sometimes (this category includes myself), as well as the overall apocalyptic negativity, made trying to understand them a matter of willpower. But through all this, I gained two things. Firstly, I learned to not be offended by differences or even personal attacks. Which is why, I suggest, the best way to cure what people like Jonathan Haidt call the 'coddling' of

the minds of young people is to simply encourage them to 'meet the enemy'. Secondly, I learned to think critically about my own views, having to mentally defend them from counter-arguments all the time. This also taught me that free speech leads to critical thinking, and sound ideas ultimately winning in the end. Finally, I learned to appreciate the common humanity people on the other side shared with people like myself. Meeting the enemy often results in the realization that, deep down inside, perhaps we ain't that different after all.

By seriously dealing with voices on the other side of the divide, rather than just stereotyping and making fun of them like many people did, I saw something that they didn't: mostly, these were good people, sincere about their values, wanting to make the world a better place like we do, just having a different view of what that would entail. They cared for their families and their communities, just like us. They were sincere about their wish to uphold family

values, and it's something that we could learn from them, despite our differences regarding where gay marriage fit into this (later on, British Prime Minister David Cameron would articulate a 'conservative case for gay marriage' that combined the best of family values and inclusion, which showed the two can indeed work hand in hand). Despite our bitter arguments on politics, there was still a common humanity we could embrace.

By trying to bridge the divide, I found our common ground, and learned a lot from people who I still had strong disagreements with. In today's highly charged political landscape, where some people seem to think meeting with the 'enemy' in any way is a betrayal, I highly recommend this approach. It will help everyone understand those with different views more, and see them more as worthy debate partners rather than hostile enemies.

I also came to understand that good people can, and often do, disagree on issues. And, at the end of the day, if we embrace our common humanity, we must see those with different views as equal in moral standing to us. After all, part of our common humanity is that we are all fallible human beings, trying to do what we think is the morally correct thing but not always getting it right. Given that there is nobody on Earth who can fairly judge who is right, I guess the only way to truly have peace, and truly respect each other's dignity, is to live and let live. Let us each do what we believe, let us each build and maintain our lives and communities using our own values, and let time and the results it brings be the judge as to who has the better ideas. My Moral Libertarian model was specifically designed to allow this to happen. As a moral absolutist, I do believe there is a right and wrong, but nobody on Earth can determine what is right for certain, so objective results are the only reliable judge as to what is the correct way. In the meanwhile, don't forget our common humanity. Remember that, despite

our differences, we still have a lot of common ground.

Chapter 3. Reality Trumps All Theory

The problem with the way politics is practiced is that too many politicians are 'ideological', i.e. they rely on their own theory about what things work, rather than look at the reality of things. I guess the inherently antagonistic nature of parliamentary or congressional democracies, in which politics is inevitably divided into two major parties and further subfactions within, leads to an echo chamber effect in these factions and parties, which often allow theory to become dogma. Far too often, it is about proving our theory to be superior to the opposite side's theory.

In the 20 or so years that I have been paying attention to politics, I have seen plenty of examples of theory not working out in practice, with bad consequences. The Iraq War was actually a good example of this. Aside from the fact that the doctrine of 'pre-emptive strikes' is basically aggression and is hence inherently

immoral, the idea that such a policy would make the world safer has also been debunked by reality. In fact, the 2003 Iraq War ultimately made the world a more dangerous place, especially in the medium to long term.

However, I guess the biggest example of theory not translating well into reality is the kind of economic policy that ultimately led to the 2008-9 Global Financial Crisis (GFC). Ever since the 1980s, the West, led by America and Britain, went on wave after wave of deregulation, cutting welfare spending, and privatization. These decisions were based on theoretical considerations, like a fundamental belief that 'the freer the market, the freer the people', rather than careful consideration of the actual consequences of these policies. Even before the GFC, many people had pointed out the economic strain these policies were having on working class families and communities, leading to increased family breakdown and social

problems. Ultimately, the GFC proved that these policies were inherently unsustainable.

Since the GFC, there has been a swing of the economic pendulum to the other side, and anti-market economy thinking has become mainstream throughout the Western Left again. It started out with calling out how 'market fundamentalism' led to the enrichment of the 1% at the expense of the 99%, but soon evolved into more extreme forms. Old school left-wing dogma, which blame the market economy for every imaginable social evil, is suddenly respectable again. Moreover, the mainstreaming of postmodern critical theories, like critical race theory, at about the same time, led to the market economy being blamed for things like racism too! I believe these developments are as fundamentally misguided as the market fundamentalism of a generation ago, because they are just as based on pure theory over actual reality.

This is why my idea of Moral Libertarianism is a fundamentally practical one, rather than a theoretical one. To judge whether an action or policy is good from a Moral Libertarian lens, the standard is whether it will lead to us getting closer to, or further away from, equal and maximum moral agency for every individual, in practice. Using this standard, both 1980s neoliberal market fundamentalism and the anti-market fundamentalism in the version of socialism championed by many in the Western Left today are bad ideas, because they ultimately lead to a movement away from equal moral agency among individuals. This is because market fundamentalism inevitably leads to economic hardship for working class individuals and families, while anti-market fundamentalism inevitably leads to centralized control and lack of individual choice, which effectively means tyranny of the majority in the best case scenario, or even dictatorship of a small elite in the worst case scenario.

In coming up with the aforementioned Moral Libertarian principle of equal and maximum moral agency for every individual, my wish was to preserve the good parts of conventional libertarianism, while getting rid of the dogmatic and impractical parts that has caused it to be an almost irrelevant movement up until now. Libertarianism is great because it is principled. Too many generic 'liberals', especially in America, have at least partially adopted inherently anti-liberal ideas like postmodernism and critical theory, because they only have a vague notion of needing to support social justice, rather than basing their politics on any form of classical liberal worldview. However, conventional libertarianism's core principle, the non-aggression policy (NAP), is too theoretical in that it does not examine the practical consequences of actions. It is therefore often hard to apply in real life, and could result in very impractical policies, depending on how it is interpreted. Moral Libertarianism has the principledness of conventional libertarianism, while still being rooted in practical reality.

The other thing is, liberalism, and our Western liberal democratic system more generally, was always meant to be rooted in practical reality. John Locke, the father of classical liberalism, was a man of science who was fundamentally committed to the truth, and he was also one of the great empirical thinkers of his time. Other classical liberal thinkers were similarly committed to truth, empiricism and practicality. Theirs was a principled political framework geared to encourage truth seeking in the real world. If we understand classical liberalism in this way, then neither the overly theoretical conventional libertarians, nor the vague and unprincipled mainstream 'liberals', sometimes also known as 'progressives', are worthy heirs of the classical liberal tradition. Moral Libertarianism is both principled and rooted in practical reality, and should be a worthy heir to the classical liberal tradition.

Chapter 4. A Clear Purpose Is Essential

In the time that I have been observing politics, many political movements have come and gone. The 2010s was perhaps the most politically heated period in the West since two generations ago, with multiple movements competing for attention at any time. And one thing I have observed is that movements with a clear purpose and plan tend to be much more successful than those without.

The movement I would rate as most successful has to be the gay marriage rights movement. This was a movement with a clear goal, and a clear plan to achieve it. The goal was simply to change the law so that two people of the same gender can get married, and the plan was to achieve this via the court system, representative democracy, or alternatively, referendum (which was generally not preferred but preparations were always made for one). In turn, to make any of this possible, there was a

broader plan of trying to change hearts and minds in the general public. As you can see, marriage equality advocates had a clear goal, as well as clear pathways to achieve that goal.

On the other hand, movements which have been objective failures are the 99% movement stemming from Occupy Wall Street, and the libertarian movement stemming from Ron Paul's 2012 Presidential run. The thing these movements had in common was that there wasn't a clear purpose, clear goals to achieve, or clear plans to achieve these goals. Standing up for the 99% was a vague aspiration. The different factions in the movement strongly disagreed on the details. Libertarian 'policy debates' were often more like fantasy football than real sport. In both cases, there was no clear consensus possible as to the 'thing to do next', beyond just talk. In both cases, this meant the movement ultimately fizzled out relatively quickly.

I guess the lesson from all this is, for any movement to be successful, there must be a clear purpose, and clear goals that supporters can agree on and work towards. The problem with much of contemporary liberalism is that there is not enough of these things, outside of specific demands like gay marriage. Even self-identified liberals can't agree on what the purpose of liberalism ultimately is, as well as what goals we should pursue right here, right now, in the context of the early 21st century Western world. This is why liberalism has often become confused with fundamentally illiberal thinking lately. Left-leaning liberals have been influenced by anti-liberal schools of thought like postmodern and identity-based critical theory, which have a clear goal of challenging and supplanting liberalism itself. They can't even seem to differentiate between the liberal conception of social justice, vs the criticalist one, even though the two are necessarily incompatible (i.e. what is just under criticalism is going to be unjust under liberalism, and vice versa). Meanwhile, right-leaning libertarians

have been influenced by what I call pseudo-libertarianism, where private property rights are used to justify an unlimited ability to exclude and discriminate, as long as it isn't being done by a centralized government. This line of thinking is very close to the far-right, and indeed, many pseudo-libertarians have actually jumped ship to the neoreaction movement or even the alt-right later on.

One of the reasons why I started writing about Moral Libertarianism was to give liberalism a clear purpose, and clear goals that can be practically worked towards. The overarching purpose is to eventually achieve 'equal and maximum moral agency for every individual'. Our plan is to get there by gradually moving towards that state in all areas of life. The application of this principle to tackling all sorts of issues in front of us are our more immediate goals. This way, I hope liberalism can be given a new lease of life again, after many decades of confusion and stagnation.

Chapter 5. Utopian Plans Lead To Disasters

As I said before, I had been strongly opposed to the 2003 Iraq War since the beginning. I knew all that talk about 'spreading freedom' and 'making the world safer' wouldn't actually happen, at the very least. But by 2014, even I was shocked about how bad things had gotten. Vast areas of the Middle East were completely destabilized, and the people living there were suffering immensely. We who lived in the West were also increasingly worried about our own safety, due to the increasing terrorist attacks. Judging from this angle, the Bush administration's decision to launch the Iraq War must have been one of the worst ideas in recent history.

Yet, looking back, there was indeed a substantial proportion of the general public, as well as some policy experts and public intellectuals, who enthusiastically supported the war. They bought all that marketing about

'spreading freedom' and 'making the world safer', for some reason. I believe that, without their support, the Bush administration and its allies would have been much more likely to be pressured into reconsidering their plans. Therefore, their support was crucial to this monumental error going ahead in the first place. By now, many of these war supporters have publicly said they were wrong. They have little choice, if they want to maintain their reputations, given how history has played out. I believe all humans are fallible, and people should be forgiven for bad judgements. However, the important thing is that we learn from this episode, and make sure history does not repeat itself. After all, some have pointed out that, if the West had truly learned its lessons from the Vietnam War, the Iraq War wouldn't have happened at all.

I believe that, by now, it should be clear that the West minding its own business, and taking a non-interventionist approach to the rest of the

world as much as possible, is the best principle to maintain, to avoid mistakes like Vietnam and Iraq happening again in the future. There are many arguments for peace and non-intervention, ranging from world peace, to mutual respect of sovereignty, to saving money to spend on social programs at home. However, it is clear that these arguments did not convince the kind of people who enthusiastically supported the Iraq War, and other similarly distant conflicts before it, and we need something else to convince them. So let me make another case to these people: utopian plans don't work, because context matters. This would be a 'conservative case against intervention'.

Indeed, given that most of those who supported the Iraq War were on the political Right, they should understand this very basic principle of the conservative worldview: that a society, its values, and its institutions are the product of centuries of evolution, and that a society cannot

be separated from its history, values and customs abruptly without ill effects. Knowing this, then, one should know that a Western-led attempt to intervene in a non-Western culture, with an aim of imposing Western liberal democracy there, can only ultimately lead to bad outcomes. As a result of this realization, in recent years, I have had a personal principle of not commenting on non-Western politics. My political conscience has been entirely formed by Western politics, informed by Western values, events in the West, and circumstances that apply to the West. Based on the empirical scientific principle of not applying the observed data outside of its range of validity, I honestly cannot say that my values and principles are applicable outside the West at all. The other thing is, I don't know enough about the actual situation there, I haven't always been following their history and politics, and I don't know their culture and political context well enough either, so I'm not in any position to make a constructive comment. End of story. If more people maintained this principle, the West

wouldn't be getting into so many foreign wars, which would be a great outcome in and of itself.

Instead of having utopian dreams of spreading liberal democracy (especially by force, how ironic) to foreign countries, we in the West can focus on shoring up liberal democratic values in the West. Classical liberal values are facing their greatest challenge in the West since at least World War II, with the rise of various identity politics movements on both the Left and the Right, and anti-liberal political philosophies like postmodernism and the identity-based critical theories. Of particular concern is that these philosophies all aim to erode the principle of individual moral responsibility, which has been at the core of Western civilization since at least the Enlightenment. Liberal democracy clearly needs a stronger defense, in the context of the West itself. We should focus on saving liberal democracy in the West. This will give us plenty of work to do for many years to come.

Chapter 6. The Political Winds Suddenly Shifted

Ever since my college days, I have believed in a vision of society advancing through gradual reforms that, bit by bit, increase the level of liberty and equality enjoyed by its citizens. Reforms like gay marriage are the building blocks of this long-term vision, just like the reforms of legal racial equality, equal education and employment opportunities for women, and women's suffrage that came before. Bit by bit, we are getting more free and equal, and things are getting better for previously marginalized minorities over time. I strongly believe we should continue on this track going forward.

For several years in the early-to-mid 2010s, I thought that things were definitely getting better. There was a reactionary phase during the 2000s, during which many people supported restricting civil rights and even going

to unnecessary wars due to a fear of terrorism. At the same time, the Religious Right successfully caused a moral panic over the gay marriage issue. However, these sentiments seemed to have died down across the West by the early 2010s, in favor rational debate over moral panic, and in favor of a more liberal or libertarian approach to various issues. I remember feeling that the West was on the right track again.

However, I began noticing a big shift in the political winds, especially in, but not limited to, the 'Left' or 'progressive' side of politics. There was an increasingly us-vs-them adversarial approach, defined on identity grounds like race, gender, sexual orientation and so on. People were being divided into privileged vs historically marginalized, or even oppressor vs oppressed, based on these immutable characteristics. There was an increased focus on historical events, as if the current generation must pay for the sins of people in the past, equality in the

here and now be damned. Most concerning for a committed liberal like myself was the trend towards trashing our most cherished Enlightenment values: there was a blatant disregard for free speech, and even a disrespect for the scientific method and objectivity in the most extreme cases.

I was particularly concerned about what I saw in the LGBT community. The shift towards this new worldview was particularly marked among my fellow LGBT people, where the sentiment that mainstream society was out to oppress us became increasingly prevalent. Ideas like how speech could be equated with violence and how 'safety' required suppressing speech or even excluding people based on political views became the commonly accepted view. You have to remember that, all this was happening even as gay marriage was winning in more and more places, which certainly didn't make sense to me. I was also very worried that this hostile attitude could put gay marriage reform at risk in the

places where there was substantial progress but hadn't been won yet back then, like Australia and some European countries. Looking back, this worry could be clearly seen in my writing in the mid-2010s, including the short novels I wrote back then.

During the period of 2014 to 2017, the rapid shift in political winds, especially on the Left, left me feeling very worried, which eventually led me to discovering the truth about why things were changing so rapidly, and what we could do to turn the ship around before it's too late. This will be the theme of the next few chapters. But this sudden and unexpected shift also highlighted something important for me: the world can take unexpected turns for the worse at any time, even when things appeared to be going well. That's why we need to strongly hold onto our values at all times. When chaos and setbacks come, only our values will keep us grounded in our response. This is the reason why we must be absolutely clear about our

fundamental values and principles at all times, and not just have vague sentiments or aspirations about what we believe in.

Chapter 7. Political Currents Are A Long Term Thing

One thing that struck me about the recent changes on the Left was that, in some ways at least, they looked like a return to the radicalism of the 1960s and 70s. During that period of Western history, progressive activists took a very confrontational and radical approach to social change, attacking everything from white picket fence nuclear families to the liberal social contract. Of course, not everything was exactly like how it was back then. For example, the division of people into oppressors vs oppressed based on immutable characteristics appeared to be new, and I couldn't find any period of Western history in which similar ideas were prevalent. Besides, the 1960s New Left was at least famous for the 'free speech movement', something the 2010s New Left unfortunately don't share. Therefore, in many ways, the 2010s New Left is even more problematic than the 1960s New Left. But there are definitely

similarities in the anger, negativity, and anti-everything attitude.

The thing to remember about the radicalism of the 1960s and 70s was that they directly led to the reactionary conservatism of the following three decades. The strikes that almost paralyzed the economy invited austerity, de-unionization, and the suite of reforms generally known as 'neoliberalism'. The challenge to family values and religious sensitivities led to a resurgence in conservative Christianity, which became a political force in its own right for the first time in a long time. The increase in family breakdowns led to a deep suspicion towards even moderate reforms like gay marriage. The increase in crime due to the chaotic circumstances led to 'tough on crime' legislation, mandating long prison sentences across the board, which eventually led to huge increases in incarceration rates, particularly among some racial minorities. I personally grew up during this long backlash, and only saw the

Western world return to the road of liberal reform when I was in my 20s. I really didn't want to risk society going through all that again. So why would some 'progressive activists' still favor the 60s and 70s approach, despite the disastrous consequences it brought? Especially just as liberal reformism was showing great promise?

I only got my answer to that question after digging much deeper, and learning the theory and motivations that were driving the 2010s New Left radicalism. Basically, what we are seeing now is the result of many decades of historical developments. It really is a long story. The root of the ideologies that drove the 2010s radicalism, as well as the 1960s radicalism before it, were originally developed in the early-to-mid 20th century by academics and intellectuals in the Western far-left, who were frustrated with how Western politics had turned out during their lifetime (i.e. reform won over revolution), and the welfare capitalist society

that enjoyed strong support among workers and elites alike in the post-war West. Their work was intended to critique, challenge and essentially overturn that society, and the liberal social contract underlying it. Hence, in these 'New Left' ideas, there is an inherently negative attitude towards pursuing reformist progress within the liberal democratic system. In the 1960s and 70s, students who were frustrated with the Vietnam War, the lack of progress on civil rights and women's rights were drawn to these ideas. Many of them in turn became influential activists and thinkers. During the backlash years of the 1980s to 2000s, the New Left continued to develop their ideas even as the mainstream were not paying attention, adding in influences from French postmodernism and identity politics. Eventually, these ideas also went mainstream and caused the radical wave of the 2010s. The problem for us is, radical activists in both waves are/were ardently opposed to liberal reformism, even if the evidence is that it brings good results. They insist on going with their confrontational

approach, even if it risks massive backlash and reaction.

Learning about the context that gave rise to the 2010s New Left radicalism made me realize something: that the development, trajectory, interactions and effects of political currents are a long-term, intergenerational thing. There really is no such thing as the 'end of history', even if we only look at the West. Political thought currents may rise and fall at different time points based on the circumstances of the time, which they may be able to take advantage of or not, but such currents, once established, are generally with us for many generations. Moreover, those committed to a certain political thought current do not easily give up on it even if their ideas have been rejected by society, and disproved by objective evidence. Instead, we should just expect these disproven ideas to be repackaged in another form, and potentially rise again some time in the future.

Looking at the broader picture, this continuous rise and fall and interactions of various currents also means that there is never going to be an established social consensus that can last for anything more than a generation or two. The social consensus is hence a matter of ongoing negotiation and renegotiation all the time, continuously shaped by the rising and falling political currents at any time. This observation means that we can't assume the values currently favored by the social consensus will always stay favored. It means that, if we cherish parts of the current social consensus of Western democracies, such as free speech, rational debate, and a respect for objective and scientific truth, we need to continuously stand up for and justify these ideas, in the face of new issues and new debates. Conversely, it also means that if these values have lost ground, like they seem to have in certain intellectual and cultural circles in recent years, that ground could be regained with enough determination and focus. This is why I believe liberalism can be fully revived in the West if we inject it with

enough 'life force', to make people passionate about liberal values once again. My Moral Libertarian work is about helping that to happen, by promoting a morality-based case for liberal values, and highlight how such values are linked to core principles of the post-Enlightenment Western moral system.

Chapter 8. Don't Just Look At The Surface

One thing about how people, including prominent journalists and public intellectuals, are reacting to the recent shifts towards illiberalism in parts of the Left, is that they too often react to what is on the surface, without digging deeper and truly understanding the phenomenon. This means that they often propose maladaptive solutions, that both actually cause harm to people, and further encourage the illiberal faction of the Left. We need to remember that what are dealing with is a worldview and ideology that have deep academic roots. It had developed over multiple generations, with influences from multiple schools of thought from multiple countries (mainly France, Germany, Britain, America). We need to acknowledge that we are dealing with a very complex system of philosophy (theory) and activism (practice). Postmodern criticalism is certainly much more complicated than liberalism itself, or other ideologies that we are

familiar with, like conservatism or socialism. This means that a complete and thorough understanding is needed, if we want to respond effectively to this challenge.

Let's take the example of LGBT rights. I am, of course, deeply saddened and frustrated that the illiberal postmodern criticalists have basically targeted our community as a site of practice for their ideology. I am frustrated that they keep speaking for us, saying how 'the relationship between gender and genetic sex is a matter for philosophy, not science, to establish', when the clinical medical evidence for the validity of trans people has been well established for many decades. This only serves to confuse people, and frustrate the progress towards understanding, acceptance, and trans rights reforms. I am truly worried about the impact this ideology will have on our future. I'm doing my best to challenge this narrative and re-center the experience of people experiencing gender dysphoria (which accounts for at least

the vast majority of trans people), but I'm not too confident about where this is going to go in the future, especially given that postmodernist activists seem to have better access to mainstream media than us at the moment. (Again, this seems to be mostly because mainstream media journalists don't have a deep enough understanding about what is actually going on in the trans community.)

Sadly, some people seem to have identified trans people, or even the whole LGBT community, as being a creation of postmodern identity politics, and hence they see us as the enemy, just for being ourselves. During the debate on gay marriage, especially in the lead-up to the Australian vote (where every Australian got a yes/no vote on gay marriage), some people said they were going to vote 'no' just because the illiberal Left was supporting it. They seem to have the misguided view that, if they force LGBT people back into the closet, the postmodern ideology would be defeated.

However, this not only has the cruel effect of harming people in real life (everyone needs to remember that these are real lives we are talking about), it could also have the opposite effect. Supporting oppression of LGBT people can only push more of them into the arms of the illiberal Left. Besides, even if the LGBT community disappeared overnight, postmodernism and criticalism will still exist. These ideologies were invented long before LGBT issues went mainstream, by mostly straight academics. If the LGBT community didn't exist, postmodernist activists would just find another group to use to practice their agenda.

The other thing many people still don't understand is that, criticalism is all about conflict, and the practice of postmodern critical theories relies on creating and encouraging conflict. Therefore, you can't fight criticalism by opposing everything criticalists seem to support. Doing so actually means you are

playing your part in their plan. Moreover, what criticalists appear to want is also sometimes deceptive. Revisiting the aforementioned example about gay marriage, all the criticalists I have ever met were basically not keen on the legal reform of gay marriage itself. Within LGBT politics, it was always the liberal and moderate reformist faction, along with the smaller conservative faction, that have been most passionate about gay marriage. In contrast, the criticalist faction has long decried that marriage is a 'bourgeois institution' we shouldn't be focusing on, and that for some reason only middle-class white cis gay men would benefit from marriage equality (which is of course totally wrong, but notice the heavy emphasis on identity divisions there). The reason why the criticalist faction appeared to be loudly shouting about gay marriage was basically to pick a fight with the (non-LGBT) conservatives who opposed it. Indeed, in trying to pick a fight, criticalist activists sometimes did things that risked harming the cause itself, like 'cancelling' anti-gay marriage people, which led to backlash

against the marriage equality movement. But like I said, they don't really care about harming gay marriage itself. It is the fight they want. (It was indeed this fact that woke me up to the harms of criticalism in the first place.)

Knowing all this, the most effective way to stop the postmodern criticalism agenda is to discourage conflict along lines of immutable identity characteristics like race, gender and LGBT status as much as possible. This is where the Moral Libertarian principle comes in very useful. It provides a framework to allow rational debate on an equal playing field, that completely discounts identity characteristics. I believe it is important that we insist everyone participate in debates about issues from a pure-merit angle. That is, all arguments should be considered solely based on their merit, and one should leave their identity, as well as their political affiliations (but not necessarily their values) behind in considering each argument. This ideal is actually somewhat similar to John

Rawls's 'veil of ignorance' thought experiment, where people are called upon to imagine society without knowing their identity in that society. Rawls actually thought that this would lead to much fairer policies for disadvantaged and marginalized minorities, and I completely agree. This could well be used as an effective alternative model for social justice, to attract people away from postmodern criticalism.

Chapter 9. You Can't Defeat Negativity With Negativity

Faced with the persistent negativity and often unreasonable stances of postmodern criticalist activists, there have been a variety of responses, from political withdrawal due to exhaustion, to intellectual analysis (I'm in this camp), to outright reaction. However, especially in the earlier stages, the reactionary component was quite dominant. This led to an essentially 'fight negativity with negativity' approach, heaping negativity on postmodern criticalism driven activism, without offering much in terms of an alternative positive agenda. The thing we must remember about this reactionary strategy is that it was not only unsuccessful in turning the tide against illiberal forms of activism, it actually pushed more people into their arms. I saw all this unfold right before by eyes, and I have become very frustrated about it, to be honest.

So why was the reactionary strategy so ineffective? The thing we must remember is that, you can't fight negativity with more negativity. Negative thinking is the domain of criticalism, because it seeks to tear down society as it exists. Positive thinking is the domain of liberalism, because it has always sought to improve on the society we have. By dragging ourselves down to the same level of negativity as the criticalists, we end up validating their negativity, and make their approach look better than ours. This is why, by 2020, illiberal forms of activism were stronger than ever, with liberal reformism seen as ineffective by many young adults. I guess, if negativity is the only game in town, many people would choose to go with being negative about everything, which is what criticalism ultimately is. Indeed, as I previously illustrated, much of postmodern criticalist activism is about encouraging conflict, so if you fight them with negativity, you actually participate in their plot!

A good example of the reactionary strategy was the 'anti-SJW movement' of the mid-2010s, which ultimately tainted the reputation of the identity-skeptical faction of liberalism, and served to validate the criticalists' portrayal of identity skepticism as being in bed with reactionary bigotry. Although this phenomenon came and went in just a few years, I think there are lessons we can learn from it. SJW stands for Social Justice Warrior, a negative term used to describe certain social justice activists, usually the ones seen as unreasonable, confrontational, or counterproductive. This category included plenty of postmodern criticalism driven activism. However, the use of the term broadened so much later on, that some people used it to describe basically anyone supporting social justice. The term SJW hence had a flexibility to it. The vagueness of the term SJW likewise applied to 'anti-SJW'. Hence, the anti-SJW movement included a broad range of people, from those who wanted a more rational and hence effective social justice movement, to those who outrightly opposed any social

change, and might even harbor bigoted beliefs themselves. The only thing they shared in common was opposition to 'SJW activism', which was again defined differently by different people. Over time, the intense focus on being 'against SJWs' encouraged an increasingly broad definition of SJW-ism, which pushed to movement further and further into reactionary conservatism. Ultimately, many of the libertarians jumped ship, leaving the movement to essentially feed right into ultra-conservative politics by the end of its life.

The fundamental problem with the anti-SJW movement was that it was based on people being against something in common, rather than being for something in common. That is why they could not exclude the reactionaries who didn't want social justice reform at all, and ended up being tainted by strong association with this crowd. It is one thing to be concerned about 'SJW activism', especially since a lot of it was rooted in postmodernism and criticalism,

but it is another thing to oppose the concept of social justice altogether. There is still plenty of racism, sexism, homophobia and bigotry in this world, and if we are true liberals, we must keep working to fix this.

The sad history of the anti-SJW movement and adjacent political currents in the 2010s show that we need to be actively 'for liberalism', and not just 'against the illiberal Left'. We should be against the illiberal Left not because we find them 'annoying' or 'uncool', but because we want to see a better path to progress towards social justice, and the illiberal Left's worldview and tactics will actively harm what we want. Being clear about this prevents us from falling into the trap of the 'anti-SJW' attitude.

Chapter 10. Sometimes, You Have To Go Alone

By the late 2010s, the cultural and political landscape of the West had taken what I believed was a turn for the worse. Postmodern critical theory inspired identity politics activism had become the most prominent faction of 'the Left', and old-school liberalism was definitely out of fashion among young adults passionate about social justice. Meanwhile, many of those who opposed this new identity politics were taking a 'fight negativity with negativity' approach, which was ineffective, and also predisposed them to effectively siding with reactionaries or even bigots sometimes. Enabled by the design and algorithms of many social media platforms, both camps also largely existed in their own echo chambers, and couldn't see their own faults. In both echo chambers, there was a strong tendency for people to agree with the majority view, and harshly reject those who didn't conform. As a

result, the combination of polarization and conformity (with one's own end of the polarized debate) became increasingly the norm.

Meanwhile, trans activism had become dominated by postmodern criticalist ideology, which promoted dogma like 'gender is a social construct', which complicated and confused the trans rights debate. This allowed anti-trans forces from both the Left (mainly a faction of radical feminists) and the Right (mainly the religious right and other reactionary social conservatives) to gain credibility, and bring on a backlash. The trans debate had effectively become ideologues vs reactionaries, with both camps forgetting that trans lives are real lives. Caught in the middle of all this, I became increasingly frustrated.

And then, I realized something: I probably can't change the world with my own efforts alone, but at least I can maintain my own values, and

forge my own path. I can refuse to go along with all the aforementioned misguided trends, and instead argue for my own views at all times, whether they are popular or not right now. I can do what I believe is correct morally, and what I believe is doing right by my fellow LGBT people. I mean, I risk being hated by people on all sides, and it's actually a lonely path to take. In the 'popularity is everything' world of social media, it's even more difficult. But life has taught me that, sometimes, you have to go alone. After all, I had gone alone, to where few people had gone, multiple times before in my own life already.

Life has taught me that conflicts and unresolved issues are generally a matter of lack of understanding, and given good faith dialogue and patience, things will gradually improve. This means we should approach those who disagree with us with friendliness and good faith, wherever possible, because these things are essential for dialogue and understanding.

Importantly, it means we should never adopt a tribalist us-vs-them attitude, like many activists (both the LGBT activists and the anti-postmodern activists) are doing now. Given my beliefs here, I feel like I need to draw attention to the differences between my approach and their approach. I believe we should never fake unity just to make everyone feel comfortable.

Life has also taught me that whatever situation we are faced with right now isn't forever, and things can change in unimaginable ways in a matter of years. That positivity is the way to win hearts and minds, and the long arc of history does bend towards justice. And most importantly, that in this changing world, the most important thing is to have clarity about what we believe in. If we maintain our values, keep working in good faith, and give it a bit of patience, I believe things will eventually turn out right in the end. These lessons all reinforce the idea that I have to go it alone in times like

these, and also give me strength and guidance in doing so.

And in deciding to go it alone, and be brutally honest about my views, I have found a small but substantial number of people who actually agree with what I say, and appreciate my work. I discovered that not everyone has been captured by the ideologically driven echo chambers yet, and there is still hope for a better conversation. It's just a matter of more people willing to be brutally honest.

Part 2: Further Articles to Explain the Context of Moral Libertarianism

Moral Libertarianism: The Fundamental View

Liberalism is the ideology that is primarily concerned with liberty, above all else. Putting liberty first is the defining feature of liberalism, therefore. However, this cannot be liberalism's only feature, for liberty is also found in various forms in other ideologies. For example, in traditional feudal societies with absolute monarchies, the King had almost unlimited liberty. The lords also had an amount of liberty much greater than any citizen in a modern liberal democracy: for example, they had the 'liberty' to own and trade slaves. The unique thing about liberalism is that it aims to distribute as equally as possible the liberty of each person in society. Therefore, while nobody can have the liberties of kings and nobles past, everyone can have their fair share of liberty. While liberals disagree on how liberty can be distributed most equally, with some arguing for NAP-based libertarianism and others arguing for

a strong welfare state, this often unspoken shared principle is what we have in common.

In our moral system, the post-Enlightenment Western moral system, it is generally held that people should be entirely responsible for their own actions. Indeed, I would argue that, if this principle does not hold, our whole moral system would collapse. Hence, to be moral, in the context of our code of morality, is to be fully responsible for our own choices, our own decisions, and our own actions, and to make sure that these don't result in negative outcomes, especially on other people. Our moral system places a particular emphasis on individual accountability and responsibility, and for our moral system to work, our culture and politics must support these notions clearly, and to the fullest extent possible. Furthermore, the individualistic nature of Western morality means that, whenever power is concentrated in a few hands, those few people will exercise their power solely according to their own sense

of morality, not because it's their fault, not because it's the system's fault, but because it's what Western morality actually expects people to do. In this situation, there will inevitably be a lack of moral accountability, which means a lack of moral responsibility.

How does liberalism's dedication to distributing liberty equally make it a moral ideology? To answer this question, we need to first look at what liberty is. Liberty is the power an individual has over their own actions, their ability to put their ideas into action. Therefore, looking at it from a moral perspective, liberty is moral agency, i.e. the ability to act in accordance with one's moral compass. An equitable distribution of liberty therefore ensures an equitable distribution of moral agency. In this way, liberalism ensures that every individual in society has an equal share of moral agency. At this point, we need to turn to the fact that liberty (and hence moral agency) are also finite resources: if some have more,

others must have less. If lords can command slaves (therefore having more liberty), slaves will not be able to act according to their own moral compass, and thus have no moral agency. Therefore, in an equal distribution of liberty (and hence moral agency), everyone can have full moral agency over their own beliefs and actions, but nobody can have moral agency over another. This, I would argue, makes liberalism the ONLY morally valid ideology (in the context of the Western liberal-democratic system; I believe we should not generalize our Western experience and/or impose it on other cultures, or otherwise disrespect people living in other cultures and contexts, again because of the need to respect the equal moral agency of all).

The Moral Libertarian principle of Equal Moral Agency for every individual is a principle derived from the individual accountability requirements of the Western moral system, and seeks to prevent lack of moral accountability. It ensures, as much as possible, that nobody has moral

agency over another person's actions, and that every person can act according to their own moral agency. This is where I believe the true heart of liberalism lies, and it is why I say that liberalism is the best expression of morality, as it is commonly agreed upon in our shared moral system. Given our individualistic moral code, I believe this is the only way to ensure morality is upheld. Anything else would violate the basic assumptions of our moral code, which would lead to deep confusion about what constitutes morality, as interwar Europe under fascism had shown, in a very disastrous way.

I believe that the principle of equality of moral agency is the most important principle in political morality, because it is the only way of distributing liberty (which is one and the same as moral agency, liberty being from a political rights perspective and moral agency from a moralistic perspective) that is consistent with the fact that every human being has equal moral standing from birth, and the fact that all

human beings are flawed in some ways (i.e. not perfect and not capable of knowing the absolute truth in every sense).

In particular, all my political and social commentary assumes the context of a Western liberal democratic system, where there is approximately one person one vote to elect our governments, where interest groups and ideological factions aim to sway the decisions of voters, and where a government of almost any ideology could be elected, potentially beholden to one or more interest groups. In such a system, if voters receive biased information due to interference with free speech, they could get their decision totally wrong. If they elect a culturally authoritarian government that, for example, treats people differently based on identity or opinion, this would have severe moral consequences. It is this situation that Moral Libertarianism was specifically developed to guard against.

On 'Liberal' & 'Moral'

Today, I want to explore my idea that liberalism is the 'most moral ideology' in the context of Western democracy, the basis upon which I argue strongly for the continued application of liberal values in Western democracies, and the rejection of ideas which are incompatible with such liberal values, like critical theory and postmodernism.

In our moral system, the post-Enlightenment Western moral system, it is generally held that people should be entirely responsible for their own actions. Indeed, I would argue that, if this principle does not hold, our whole moral system would collapse. Hence, to be moral, in the context of our code of morality, is to be fully responsible for our own choices, our own decisions, and our own actions, and to make sure that these don't result in negative outcomes, especially on other people. Our moral system places a particular emphasis on

individual accountability and responsibility, and for our moral system to work, our culture and politics must support these notions clearly, and to the fullest extent possible. Furthermore, the individualistic nature of Western morality means that, whenever power is concentrated in a few hands, those few people will exercise their power solely according to their own sense of morality, not because it's their fault, not because it's the system's fault, but because it's what Western morality actually expects people to do. In this situation, there will inevitably be a lack of moral accountability, which means a lack of moral responsibility.

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according to their own moral agency. This is where I believe the true heart of liberalism lies, and it is why I say that liberalism is the best expression of morality, as it is commonly agreed upon in our shared moral system. Given our individualistic moral code, I believe this is the only way to ensure morality is upheld. Anything else would violate the basic assumptions of our moral code, which would lead to deep confusion about what constitutes morality, as interwar Europe under fascism had shown, in a very disastrous way.

Some revolutionary minded people may say that the current Western political system, as well as its underlying moral code, is faulty, and must be completely deconstructed and replaced. This is really the core motivation of criticalism, I think. However, this not only won't work, it could lead to dangerously immoral outcomes, as we saw in interwar Europe under fascism. Fascists thought they could turn their countries into collectivist cultures by decree,

but their regimes turned really ugly, as we all know. I think the lesson here is that, when you destroy the moral code of a civilization, you can't expect even ordinary morals to continue to be upheld. A culture's moral code takes a long time to develop and evolve, and you can't just replace it with something entirely different and expect it to work. So far, I have described the Western moral code as being based on individual responsibility ever since the Enlightenment. But if you look at it from a broader historical context, the Enlightenment was only a refinement of ideas that came before it. Western moral individualism clearly had earlier roots, as seen in historical events like the Magna Carta. While I won't deny that some cultures may be able to maintain a very moral society with a more collectivist system, I am certain that the West cannot do that. For the West, rejecting moral individualism will inevitably lead to the rejection of morality itself.

Now, when I say that liberalism is the most moral, I always mean it in the aforementioned sense. It doesn't mean that anyone who calls themselves 'liberal' are therefore automatically moral. After all, people who call themselves liberal may not even be deserving of that label. For example, it is certainly not moral to wage wars on other countries in the name of 'spreading freedom', whatever you call it.

Equal Moral Agency Does Not Require Equality of Outcome

(NOTE: This article first appeared in Moral Libertarian Horizon #4, and has been slightly edited to better convey what I mean.)

Ever since I published my articles and books about Moral Libertarianism and the principle of Equal Moral Agency for all individuals, I have repeatedly encountered a critique from the far-left: that rich people surely have much more moral agency than regular working individuals, so someone serious about Equal Moral Agency must hence oppose the market economy or something like that. Let me break this down: firstly, I do agree that the way society is set up now sometimes allows rich people to coerce poorer people in some ways, and this should change; but secondly, it doesn't imply that we need to move away from the market economy to adequately solve this problem.

Let me first clarify what I mean by Equal Moral Agency. It's essentially the same as the equal freedom of religion that underpinned classical liberalism in the 18th and 19th century, but expanded to include moral beliefs that are not necessarily religious. Basically, everyone should be free to practice their own moral beliefs, including but not limited to religion, as long as this would not unfairly limit another's rights to do so. Now, this does not imply the right to have an equal impact on the rest of the population. Indeed, there could be no such right, because even in a perfectly free and fair market of ideas, some ideas are going to be much more persuasive than others, and hence adopted by more people. Therefore, the principle of Equal Moral Agency is to be interpreted as a personal right within oneself, the way freedom of religion is interpreted. The fact that a rich businessman has much more tools at his disposal to proselytize his religion has never been interpreted as a lack of freedom of religion. Therefore, I believe Equal Moral

Agency doesn't necessarily require equality of resources.

On the other hand, Equal Moral Agency necessarily requires that the rich must not be able to coerce the poor into giving up their moral agency. This 'coercion' would include the carrot as well as the stick, because in either case the ill effects on morality are the same, i.e. letting an imperfect human being have proportionally too much moral agency and inadequate balances and checks on their behaviour. (Also, if you apply the idea of opportunity costs, carrots are just sticks worded in reverse, so carrots and sticks are really not that different anyway.) In our modern world, such coercion could include restricting the acceptable speech of others, compelling others to take certain stances, or making certain beliefs so taboo that one dare not voice it lest they lose their job or worse. These things are of course much easier to do for those with lots of money. Therefore, I believe a case can be made

for some sort of regulation, to prevent this coercion from happening.

Moreover, while Equal Moral Agency is a personal right, it does not mean there are no public sphere requirements of equal treatment. To illustrate this, we should again think about how freedom of religion is applied. For example, a public square that allows the preaching of one religion but not another would surely be seen to violate freedom of religion. In our modern world, digital platforms have essentially become our public squares. Consistently, a digital platform that allows the promotion of one religion but not another would rightly face a public outcry. Therefore, censorship of certain points of view on digital platforms could indeed be justifiably seen as an affront to the spirit of Equal Moral Agency. On a related note, a large part of the Moral Libertarian ideal is a free and fair market of ideas, so Moral Libertarians should naturally support less censorship and more free speech under all circumstances.

Furthermore, while Equal Moral Agency does not appear to call for equality on the basis of race, gender, sexuality and so on, in practice, a lack of equal treatment and equal opportunity in these areas could lead to the erosion of Equal Moral Agency. For example, in a society where racial minorities or LGBT individuals have a particularly hard time finding a job, some of them could become more willing to give up their moral agency (in terms of free speech, for example) in exchange for fulfilling basic material needs. This in turn inevitably leads to a downward race where other people become expected to give up their moral agency too (after all, if members of so-and-so minority can do it, and you're not racist or homophobic or whatever, then why can't you do that too?). I believe this gives justification to anti-discrimination laws, like the Civil Rights Act in America.

Of course, one can argue that a cashless society where private property and wage labour is banned would do away with the aforementioned problems entirely. However, every solution has its pros and cons, and the two should be balanced to get us as close to Equal Moral Agency as possible. While a market-less society would solve the problem of discrimination in private employment by eliminating private employment altogether, anti-discrimination regulations could achieve the same in a market economy. However, a completely planned economy places a lot of power in the state or the collective (i.e. whoever gets to plan the economy), which inevitably comes with other losses of freedom, e.g. the freedom to start a small business, to turn your passion into useful products, without the permission of the state or the collective. This, in turn, actually means that a market-less society is likely to be further away from the ideal of Equal Moral Agency than where we are now.

In conclusion, Equal Moral Agency, similar to the idea of freedom of religion which it is based upon, does not mean one has an equal right to impact the rest of society as another. Hence, there is no need for equality of the amount of resources at one's disposal. There could be a need to regulate certain aspects of society so that the rich and powerful cannot coerce other people to agree with their moral stances. However, I believe to suggest that we should move to something like a completely planned economic system as the solution would be entirely missing the point, because a completely planned economic system would almost by definition be further away from having Equal Moral Agency compared to where we are now.

On 'Socialists' and 'Conservatives' in the 21st Century West

Today, I want to talk about why I don't identify as a 'socialist' or a 'conservative'. I will talk about what differences I have with those movements.

Firstly, words are, by definition, a social construct, and their meaning can vary in time and place. Therefore, I think it's only useful to use words, with their definition relevant to the particular context. And given that my context is the early 21st century English-speaking Western world, the reason why I do or do not identify with a certain word has to be based on what that word is associated with in this particular context. I mean, I know that the word 'liberal' in our current context is far from equivalent to the ideal version of liberalism, but still, I feel enough affinity for it to identify with it. The

same cannot be said of 'socialist' or 'conservative'.

Let's start with 'socialist'. I have three main problems with this word, in the context of the early 21st century English-speaking Western world. Firstly, many people who call themselves socialists are sympathetic to identity politics, postmodernism, criticalism, or a mix of these things. I know that it's not what the word 'socialist' is supposed to mean in a definitional sense, but in our current context the association is clear. Secondly, many people who call themselves socialist in our current context are fundamentally antagonistic to any sort of market economy. It is even common for people to say that 'Bernie is not a real socialist' because he doesn't want to abolish the market economy. Again, I'm not saying these people are right about how they define socialism, I actually think the opposite, but it is clear that early 21st century Western socialism still has an anti-market orientation overall, and I don't

want to be associated with this kind of outdated thinking. Finally, there are too many extremists, including so-called accelerationists, who want to tear everything down, identifying as socialists in our time and space. Again, I wouldn't want to be under the same umbrella as these people.

Now, let's look at 'conservative'. Again, I have three problems with this word, in our current context. Firstly, too many reactionary politicians identify themselves as 'conservative'. If you are against all change by default, I think you're actually a reactionary rather than a conservative. But given that reactionaries love to identify as conservatives, this gives me reason to avoid the label. Secondly, conservatism is sometimes associated with a hawkish worldview that has arisen as an extension to the 20th century Cold War mentality. It's why conservatives strongly supported the Iraq War in 2003. And I want to stay as far away from that as possible. Finally, many conservative politicians are hypocrites.

They are for small government, except when they want to regulate others' behaviors. They are for free speech, except for speech they don't like. Again, I wouldn't want to be under the same umbrella as these people.

So there, I have explained my actual differences with 'socialists' and 'conservatives' in our context. I understand that these words may mean differently in other contexts, but it's not really relevant to me anyway. I also maintain that there is still plenty of common ground between myself and many socialists and many conservatives, and there are certainly things where we can work together on. Furthermore, I never judge others by the label they choose to identify as or not. After all, the word 'liberal' has been often used by people who are very illiberal too. I would definitely prefer a socialist or a conservative with liberal tendencies, rather than an illiberal person who calls themselves liberal.

The Moral Libertarian Manifesto
2021 updated version, with new footnotes

Preamble

Compared to all other available options, liberalism is still the most morally sound path for Western democratic societies going forward, and most likely to get us to the best resolution for the controversial social issues we face.

As a citizen of a Western democratic country, given the crossroads we find ourselves facing at the moment (e.g. conflicting identity politics claims, the 'history wars', the 'woke' vs 'reactionary' culture wars, the questioning of the long-standing social contract), I feel that it's my responsibility to speak up, before it's too late.

A ghost is hanging over the West: the ghost of liberalism. The ghost of only partly fulfilled yet already abandoned promises of life and liberty, of equality and fraternity. Liberalism is not quite dead yet, but nor is it truly alive. It can only watch hopelessly as far-right and alt-right white nationalist elements duel it out with far-left neo-Marxist tendencies, with liberty being the biggest loser of each and every battle. The right had made 'liberal' a dirty word for four decades, and now a new generation of the left is about to do the same, the two long-time enemies burying liberalism in a rare bipartisanship.

Is it too late for liberalism? No, not really. But to return to life, it will need a life force. Life force comes from conviction, from moral principles, and from confidence. Only the moral libertarian idea, with its grounding in the one simple principle of morality that has been the unspoken core of liberal thought in history, will be able to resuscitate liberalism and return it to its previous vitality. Moral libertarians seek to

clearly spell out their principle of Equality of Moral Agency (EMA), and vigorously apply it and defend it in the free market of ideas.

1. What is the Moral Libertarian Idea

Liberalism is an idea with a history stemming from the Western Enlightenment. The old world of master and slave was being swept away. In its place, a long line of thinkers from John Locke onwards theorised about how we can have a structure of liberty and equality instead. Since then, much has been achieved, but as we all know, the project is still incomplete. Furthermore, since the early 20th century, the rise of new forms of collectivism have repeatedly threatened to put liberal ideas in the dustbin of history. During the Great Depression of the 1930s, many thought that the end of liberalism was inevitable, with fascism and communism being the only two choices in the future. Many fascists proudly claimed that

individualism was for the 19th century; that the 20th century would be the century of collectivism. But liberty proved more resilient, and re-asserted itself in the post-war world, while fascism was largely discredited and buried once its immorality was exposed. More than half a century on, liberalism is again facing a crisis, and various forms of authoritarian collectivism are again promising utopias of various kinds. Liberalism is not as popular anymore, in a world where the dichotomy is increasingly left vs right, socialist vs capitalist, 'anti-fascist' vs 'alt-right', etc.

But it would be too soon to declare the irrelevance of liberalism once again. Why? Liberalism is the most moral ideology [in the context of the Western liberal-democratic system], and ideologies that are immoral at their core will sooner or later be discredited, like the fascism of the interwar period. Liberalism will be left standing the victor, like in the post-war period, as long as it has not been

completely killed by its authoritarian opponents.

[See footnote 1 for further explanation]

Therefore, our mission is to give liberal ideals as much life force as possible. Such life force can only come with idealism, moral conviction and clear principles. We believe that the one core liberal idea is the Equality of Moral Agency (EMA), i.e. each and every individual should have equal ability to live and act out their sincerely held vision of morality, and no outside force, no matter if it is an individual despotic ruler or the tyranny of collectivist pressure, should be able to diminish any part of this. This is in fact the only morally valid structure for society, because as inherently flawed human beings, none of us are morally correct all the time.

[See footnote 2 for further explanation]

Therefore, to be able to force another to abide by one's moral values will inevitably mean forcing another to act in a way that is immoral at least some of the time. To allow this would effectively be to allow the conditions that caused the Holocaust, where thousands of people enabled the Holocaust to happen just because they were not allowed to oppose the will of Hitler. In other words, other ideologies are too similar to fascism, from a moral libertarian point of view.

[See footnote 3 for further explanation]

Moral Libertarians argue for and uphold the principle of Equal Moral Agency at all times, on all issues, during all debates. We are well aware that we not only do not yet have equality of moral agency as things stand, the work to create a structure of equal moral agency will likely take generations to come. Each year, each decade, each generation, we strive to make things closer to the equality of moral agency, by insisting this principle be the core consideration

for any policy of reform, and to encourage reform wherever we find that things are inconsistent with this principle. Bit by bit, we will be able to create a structure providing effective equality of moral agency for all. We are inherently reformist, because revolutions require there to be a strong leadership group, making this option against the equality of moral agency in principle. Furthermore, history has shown that once the leadership group is entrenched in power, it does not easily give up its extra moral agency (nor is it able to anyway). On the other hand, slow and steady wins the race.

[See footnote 4 for further explanation]

Consistent with our core principle, Moral libertarians will strictly uphold the freedom of speech and freedom of conscience for all, and the freedom of religious belief for all. We will also strongly support reforms that remove state-sanctioned inequality of moral agency, for example marriage laws which privilege

opposite-sex marriage above same-sex marriage. We will argue for the equal respect of individuals regardless of their characteristics or their political beliefs, left, right or center. We will also argue, on the same grounds, for the equal respect and treatment of all individuals, regardless of ethnic background, gender and gender identity, sexuality, and disability status. We strongly oppose on principle all discriminatory treatment, whether justified from 'conservative' grounds of tradition, or 'progressive' grounds of historical debt or disadvantage.

2. Answering Criticisms of Moral Libertarianism

Does Moral Libertarianism harm traditions and traditional morality? No, it doesn't, simply. Moral libertarians oppose the top-down maintenance of tradition by those in power, but people are free to live by, embrace and promote traditional points of view. In fact, our

staunch opposition to top-down enforcement will, especially in the longer run, prove to be the greatest protector of traditional values.

Does Moral Libertarianism fail to protect minorities and excuse bigoted behaviour? No, we staunchly argue against discrimination, and are the only political faction which does so consistently. While we cannot support reducing freedom of speech, we do not believe this to be detrimental to minorities, because only open discussion will be effective in changing attitudes. Furthermore, moral libertarians uphold John Rawl's famous Veil of Ignorance in all our decision making, and thus are politically race-blind, gender-blind and sexuality-blind, while aiming to create systems that work for every single individual equally. Many of us support anti-discriminatory legislation in employment, for example, because we believe in society needing to be group-blind, as individualists.

Does Moral Libertarianism, with its encouragement of individualism, encourage selfishness and discourage communitarian thinking? Moral libertarians are opposed to the tyranny of the majority and strongly encourage individualist thinking. However, once individuals have their freedom to think and act, there is nothing preventing them from deciding to act for the benefit of the community. However, each individual will have their own right to determine what they believe is the greater good, rather than have a specific kind of greater good dictated to them by other people.

Does Moral Libertarianism neglect economic equality, especially historical economic equality? Moral libertarianism is not attached to any economic doctrine, and supports the democratic determination of economic policy, consistent with our support for democratic means of determination for every political issue that is unavoidably collective. In other words, every voter in the country should have a say.

This way, we can have an economic policy that will serve the economic liberty of a broad range of people. The fact that, when the people have spoken they do not choose a certain economic policy (libertarian, Marxist, or anything in between) doesn't mean that there is anything wrong. It's democracy in action.

3. Relationship to Other Liberal Movements

Moral Libertarians explicitly state the assumption that underlies all other liberal movements, thus its worldviews and aims do not differ from any other liberal movement, at the core. The main difference is that we explicitly proclaim and live by the principle of Equal Moral Agency (EMA). Therefore, we avoid being liberal in technicality but being illiberal in practice. Left-liberals sometimes fail to challenge their further-left allies' encroachment on freedom of speech, while thin libertarians sometimes fail to challenge those who claim to

be libertarian but are really Neoreaction-style authoritarian conservatives at the core, for example. By upholding the EMA, our liberalism is made stronger.

Where other liberal movements, including classical liberals, social liberals, cultural liberals, libertarians, and liberal conservatives, act according to the EMA principle, and are thus acting as truly liberal, we will support them. Otherwise, we will not.

4. Moral Libertarian Priorities for the Next Decade

In culture, we will uphold the freedom of speech and conscience for all. We will staunchly oppose any move towards so-called safe speech, and any attempts at no-platforming speakers, no matter what their political stance is. We will uphold freedom of religion for every

individual, including the right to religious attire (opposing burka bans etc.), and the right to promote religious-based beliefs (e.g. the wide variety of religious views on abortion). We will also uphold the right of individuals to be entitled to express their sincerely held beliefs and truths, regardless of race, gender, gender identity or sexuality. Therefore, we support multicultural liberty (e.g. the choice of singing competition contestants to sing in a foreign language every week if they wish to), and we support LGBT liberty (e.g. the liberty of any gender expression without negative consequences from society). We will discourage everyone in society from taking cultural opinion personally or adopting a victim mentality, because this will be bad for rational discourse in the free market of ideas.

In politics, we will advocate for the removal of state-sanctioned privileges on both grounds of individual privilege and cultural value privilege, including unequal marriage laws and adoption

laws, and work regulations that unfairly impact religious minorities, for example. We will also advocate for strong action to protect the sanctity of free speech and the prevention of so-called safe speech and no-platforming from becoming the new norm.

Footnotes:

1. When I say liberalism is the most/only moral ideology in the modern Western world, what I mean is liberalism as in the original ideal, i.e. aiming for as equal a distribution of liberty as possible. It doesn't mean any party or movement which is considered 'liberal' in common parlance (e.g. the US Democratic Party). While I believe liberalism, in this sense, should be the aspiration for Western liberal democracies in general, the ideal, in its fullest form, has never been achieved anywhere in the history of humanity. Therefore no party or leader we have seen so far is 'most moral' in the

sense I'm talking about. Everyone has fallen short, and nobody has the moral standing to claim superiority or judge others. We all need to work hard towards the aforementioned 'most moral' liberal ideal.

2. In our moral system, the post-Enlightenment Western moral system, it is generally held that people should be entirely responsible for their own actions. Indeed, I would argue that, if this principle does not hold, our whole moral system would collapse. The Moral Libertarian principle of Equal Moral Agency for every individual is a principle derived from the individual accountability requirements of the Western moral system, and seeks to prevent lack of moral accountability. Given our individualistic moral code, I believe this is the only way to ensure morality is upheld.

3. I'm not saying that other ideologies are anywhere as immoral as fascism. Just that they

are not as morally sound as the liberal ideal of equal moral agency, re the Western moral system. But that doesn't mean we can't cooperate at all when we have common ground.

4. In particular, all my political and social commentary assumes the context of a Western liberal democratic system, where there is approximately one person one vote to elect our governments, where interest groups and ideological factions aim to sway the decisions of voters, and where a government of almost any ideology could be elected, potentially beholden to one or more interest groups. In such a system, if voters receive biased information due to interference with free speech, they could get their decision totally wrong. If they elect a culturally authoritarian government that, for example, treats people differently based on identity or opinion, this would have severe moral consequences. It is this situation that

Moral Libertarianism was specifically developed to guard against.

Also from TaraElla...

The TaraElla Story

This book combines content from my 2021 works 'A Trans Popstar's Story: Being Trans and Chasing Dreams During Quarterlife', 'Eight Lessons from my Quarter Life Period' and 'The Background and Context of Moral Libertarianism' to paint a complete picture of my journey so far.